Developing a Measurement Scale For Employer Brand Personality

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Abstract:

Employees are considered as the most important internal stakeholders for companies as they play a crucial role in the growth and sustainability of an organization. Given the so-called "war for talent", employer branding has received considerable attention in research and practice. In this context, the concept of employer brand personality (EBP) is of particular importance as it has the potential to attract and retain employees to companies. Although the concept of employer brand personality has gained increasing interest in research, literature on its measurement is still limited. This manuscript fills this void by reporting the development and validation of a scale measuring EBP. Based on four studies and on previous literature on brand personality, the authors propose an 11-item EBP scale measuring four dimensions: Drive, Reliability, Customer Focus, and Strength.

1. Introduction

In recent years, employee recruitment and retention have been among the most significant challenges for companies (Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Carpentier et al., 2017; Carpentier, Van Hoye, and Weijters, 2019; Styvén, Näppä, Mariani, and Nataraajan, 2022). The increased competition among organizations regarding attracting and retaining talented employees – often referred to as "war for talent" (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, and Michaels,1998) – is driven by numerous developments: for example, the decline of birth rates and, thus, an ageing population; a shortage of highly qualified workers; a change in values in the society; and increasing globalization (Bhattacharya, Sen, and Korschun, 2008; Rosengren & Bengtsson, 2014). Since employer brand attractiveness is connected to an employee's attraction and retention to an employer, companies in a competitive job market need to build up an attractive image as an employer (e.g., Knox & Freeman, 2006; Kuepper, Klein, and Voelckner, 2021). Attraction and retention of talented personnel, in turn, is a prerequisite for delivering high product and service quality to the customer (Rampl & Kenning, 2014).

The above explanations show that employees are a key source for achieving competitive advantage (Brymer, Molloy, and Gilbert, 2014). Building on this notion, scholars have investigated the antecedents of employer brand attractiveness from the perspective of potential and current employees (e.g., Cable & Judge, 1994; Highhouse, Zickar, Thorsteinson, Stierwalt, and Slaughter, 1999; Lievens, Decaesteker, Coetsier, and Geirnaert, 2001; Van Hoye, Bas, Cromheecke, and Lievens, 2013). They have identified a plethora of factors that affect employer brand attractiveness. A well-known and often adopted approach is the instrumental-symbolic framework of Lievens and Highhouse (2003). The researchers distinguish between instrumental benefits and symbolic benefits of an employer brand and empirically demonstrate their impact on employer brand attractiveness. Instrumental benefits refer to the job or organization "in terms of objective, concrete, and factual attributes that a job/an organization either has or does not have" (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003, p. 80). Thus, they relate to job and organizational characteristics like pay, job security, or travel opportunity (Lievens, 2007). In contrast, symbolic benefits refer to the job or organization "in terms of subjective and intangible attributes" (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003, p. 81). Specifically, symbolic attributes often relate to trait inferences (e.g., competence or sincerity) potential or current employees ascribe to an employer (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).

The symbolic meaning of an employer brand is reflected in the concept of the employer brand personality. Building on the findings from the consumer-related brand personality

construct, an employer brand personality helps employees to express their own identity (Rampl & Kenning, 2014). The concept of employer brand personality (EBP), therefore, plays a vital role for employer brand management because it gives managers a better understanding of employees who express themselves by applying and working for the employer brand.

While there are some studies that consider brand personality in an employer context (e.g., Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Rampl & Kenning, 2014), these studies primarily adopted the measurement scale developed by Aaker (1997) which is oriented towards consumers. However, it is reasonable to assume that the structure of personality traits consumers ascribe to consumer brands is not be the same as the structure of trait inferences employees associate with employer brands. Consequently, it is possible that some personality characteristics of an employer brand have not been considered so far.

The purpose of this study is to develop and empirically validate a measurement scale for EBP. There are several contributions of this study: First, we contribute to the employer branding literature by providing a deeper understanding of the concept of EBP. Second, marketing practitioners can use the scale to assess the personality of their own employer brand and compare it with the personality of competing employer brands.

2. Literature Analysis and Conceptual Foundation

The brand personality concept has its origin in the consumer research context, where it has gained significant attention among a number of scholars (e.g., Geuens, Weijters, and De Wulf, 2009; Grohmann, 2009; Ivens & Valta, 2012; Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2017). A brand's personality is seen as part of a brand's image (Keller, 1993) enabling managers to differentiate the brand from competitors at a symbolic level (Plummer, 1985; Sung & Kim, 2010). The most often cited definition has been developed by Aaker, defining a brand personality as a "set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker 1997, p. 347). This illustrates the underlying assumption that consumers ascribe human personality traits to brands. Personality traits are primarily associated with the brand by linking the human characteristics of the typical user (that is, the consumer) to the brand. However, personality perceptions can also be formed by a company's employees or CEO, the brand's product endorser, and through product-related attributes. By drawing on research on the "Big Five" personality structure, Aaker (1997) identified five brand personality dimensions ("Sincerity", "Excitement", "Competence", "Sophistication", "Ruggedness") which, in turn, include 42 brand personality traits.

Ambler and Barrow (1996) were the first researchers that pointed out the relevance of applying brand management principles to Human Resource Management (HRM) for company success. They argue that an employer brand offers similar values to employees than a consumer brand offers to customers. Inspired by Aaker's (1991) understanding of strong consumer brands, they define an employer brand as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 187).

Ambler and Barrow (1996) emphasize that an employer brand, similar to a consumer brand, has a personality. Based on Aaker's (1997) definition and transferring it to the employer branding context, we define an EBP as a "set of human characteristics associated with an employer brand". We argue, that similar to consumer brands, the EBP construct is part of the employer brand image. Furthermore, personality traits are associated with the employer brand by the people associated with the brand. However, in contrast to the consumer context, here, although personality perceptions emerge through a brand's consumer and product-related associations as well, it is the potential and current work environment and primarily the typical employee of a company whose human characteristics are ascribed to the employer brand (Rampl & Kenning, 2014).

As already mentioned, most studies have primarily drawn on Aaker's brand personality scale for measuring the EBP. Rampl and Kenning (2014), for example, referred to the scale and tested the dimensions for employer brands in the consultancy sector. Lievens et al. (2001), Lievens and Highhouse (2003), and Van Hoye et al. (2013), also used an only slightly modified version of Aaker's scale. Testing the scale in the banking sector, they identified five EBP dimensions: "competence", "prestige", "sincerity", "robustness", and "innovativeness". Lievens, Hoye, and Schreurs (2005) and Lievens (2007) adapted Aaker's scale as well and transferred it to the military sector. They identified six dimensions of an EBP: "competence", "prestige", "sincerity", "ruggedness", "excitement", and "cheerfulness". Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, and Mohr (2004) proposed a scale for measuring organization personality perceptions capturing the dimensions "Boy Scout", "Innovativeness", "Dominance", "Thrift", and "Style". Davies, Chun, da Silva, and Roper (2004) corporate character scale comprises the dimensions "Agreeableness", "Enterprise", "Chic", "Competence", and "Ruthlessness".

The literature analysis shows that there is a number of empirical studies examining the concept of EBP. However, in line with Ambler and Barrow (1996), we argue that an employer brand and a consumer brand are not always the same. This is especially the case, when an employer entails many consumer brands. The German company Beiersdorf, for example,

markets several brands under different names (Nivea, Tesa, Hansaplast, La Prairie). The employer brand refers to Beiersdorf, whereas the consumer brands refer to the brands marketed to the consumer, e.g. Nivea or Tesa. Following this reasoning and, as previously mentioned, because trait inferences are primarily generated by the typical employee and not by the typical consumer, the applicability of the dimensional structure of Aaker's scale to the employer brand context seems questionable. Furthermore, we identified some other scales in literature that are closely linked to the EBP construct (Slaughter et al. 2004; Davies et al. 2004) but which contain weaknesses as well. Slaughter et al.'s (2004) scale does not refer explicitly to employer brands. The scale proposed by Davies et al. (2004) has been developed by considering not only the perceptions of employees, but also the ones of customers. Against this background, our purpose is to identify the dimensions specific to an EBP by developing and validating a measurement scale.

3. Development and Validation of the EBP Scale

Preliminary Study 1. The aim of the first preliminary study was to collect all the human characteristics that employees ascribe to employer brands. To achieve this, we conducted ten personal interviews with students already having work experience. In a first step, they were asked to name four employer brands that first come to their mind when they think of an employer brand. In a second step, they were invited to name all personality traits they ascribe to each of the four brands. Enriched with the results from the aforementioned studies on EBP, a pool of 185 nonredundant personality traits was generated.

Preliminary Study 2. In line with our aim to develop a parsimonious scale, the purpose of the second preliminary study was to reduce the generated pool of personality traits to a more manageable number. We, therefore, conducted a written survey with ten non-students and asked each of them to evaluate on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very well), how well the 185 personality traits describe two of the five following employer brands: Apple, BMW, Lidl, Novartis, and UBS. We chose these employer brands because they were most often named by the participants in the first preliminary study and because they encompass different industry sectors. We eliminated personality traits with means lower than 4.0 and standard deviations higher than 2.0. This procedure resulted in a reduced set of 94 personality traits.

Preliminary Study 3. The aims of the third preliminary study were to further reduce the generated set of personality traits and identify the dimensional structure of the EBP construct.

For this purpose, we conducted an online survey with 84 students (mean age: 22 years; 51.2 % male; average work experience: 3 years). Similar to the second preliminary study, the participants were asked to indicate how well the personality traits describe an employer brand. This time, they only had to evaluate one employer brand. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the five aforementioned employer brands. If they were not familiar with the employer, they were instructed to skip to the next one (Sung et al. 2015). We, then, reduced the set of personality traits by retaining those with a mean value greater than 5.0 and a standard deviation of less than 2.0. Consequently, 36 personality traits were omitted, resulting in a set of 58 EBP attributes.

After that, we assessed the 58 personality traits via a series of exploratory factor analyses (EFA) using Varimax rotation. These analyses revealed a four-factor solution containing the factors "Drive", "Reliability", "Customer Focus", and "Strength" (eigenvalues > 1; explained variance of 74.4%). Cronbach's alpha (α) values for the whole scale as well as for each subscale indicated good levels of scale reliability (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: EXPLORATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS RESULTS

	Factor			
Item	Drive	Reliability	Customer Focus	Strength
Serious	0.04	**0.79**	0.27	0.17
Secure	0.22	**0.83**	0.14	-0.01
Solid	0.09	**0.90**	0.10	0.04
Achievement-oriented	**0.56**	-0.01	0.19	0.27
Hardworking	**0.81**	0.20	-0.02	0.03
Focused	**0.89**	0.11	-0.04	0.10
Customer-friendly	-0.01	0.18	**0.89**	0.06
Customer-oriented	0.10	0.23	**0.89**	-0.02
Powerful	0.14	0.03	0.09	**0.87**
Power-oriented	0.11	-0.04	-0.22	**0.83**
Rich	0.12	0.24	0.20	**0.79**

Note: Factor analysis uses Varimax rotation. Bold values indicate the factor on which each item predominantly loads.

Cronbach's Alpha α (whole scale) = 0.77; α (Drive) = 0.68; α (Reliability) = 0.83; α (Customer Focus) = 0.83; α (Strength) = 0.79

Main study. The purpose of our main study is to validate the internal consistency, stability, and structure of the developed scale. We collected data by conducting an online survey. In total, our sample consisted of 212 participants (nonstudents; mean age = 34 years; 48.5 % male; average work experience = 6.5 years). Again, participants had to rate how well the personality trait attributes described the employer brand they were randomly assigned to. We considered again the five employer brands Apple, BMW, Lidl, Novartis, and UBS. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using the statistical software program SPSS AMOS 28.0.0.0. Our four-factor model provided a satisfactory fit to the data: The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06, the comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98, the Tucker Lewis index (TLI) = 0.98, and the χ^2/d.f. ratio of 1.86 (χ^2 = 70.79, df = 38, p < 0.001) fulfilled the relevant cutoff criteria.

Furthermore, the results indicated internal consistency and relative robustness of the selected items (see Table 2). The chi-square difference test provided evidence for discriminant validity of the four dimensions (χ^2difference = 406.95; df = 10; p < 0.001).

TABLE 2: CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS: THE FOUR-FACTOR MODEL

Items	Std. factor loadings
Drive (α= 0.90; CR = 0.90; AVE = 0.75)	
Achievement-oriented	0.88***
Hardworking	0.89***
Focused	0.83***
Reliability (α = 0.88; CR = 0.88; AVE = 0.72)	
Serious	0.89***
Secure	0.81***
Solid	0.78*4*
Customer Focus (α = 0.86; CR = 0.86; AVE = 0.76)	
Customer-friendly	0.91***
Customer-oriented	0.82***
Strength (α = 0.91; CR = 0.91; AVE = 0.77)	
Powerful	0.85***
Power-oriented	0.85***
Rich	0.93***

Notes: *** p < 0.001; α: Cronbach's Alpha; CR: Composite Reliability; AVE: Average Variance Extracted

Additionally, we conducted a further set of CFA's to confirm the dimensional structure and to uncover the relationship of the four factors to the broader EBP construct. First, we tested a null model. For the second model, we assumed that all items load on a single factor (i.e., one-factor model). The third model was our four-factor model. Fourth, we investigated a one-factor second-order model with four sub-dimensions. A test of four different models disclosed that our four-factor model is the model that significantly fits the data best.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present research was to develop and empirically validate a measurement scale for EBP. The result is an 11-item scale, comprising four dimensions: "Drive", "Reliability", "Customer Focus", and "Strength".

The dimension "Drive" has a similar meaning with a facet of the dimension "Competence" in Davies et al.'s (2004) corporate character scale. Employer brands strong in the dimension "Drive" will be perceived to be more "achievement-oriented", "hard-working", and "focused" than other employer brands.

The dimension labeled as "Reliability" is somewhat similar to the dimension "Competence" in other studies (e.g., Aaker, 1997; Davies et al., 2004). Employer brands higher in the "Reliability" dimension are described as being "serious", "secure", and "solid". Furthermore, given the fact that two out of four dimensions cover the "Competence" dimension identified in previous studies, suggest that, the latter, to some extent, is a crucial aspect of an EBP.

The dimension "Customer Focus" has not been observed in previous studies. Referring to our research, employer brands with a high "Customer Focus" are associated with characteristics such as "customer friendliness" and "customer orientation". This dimension suggests that employees' perception of an employer brand is also a consequence of its behavior toward the customer (and not only a result from its behavior as an employer). Consequently, a strong employer brand image goes hand in hand with a strong customer orientation of the company.

The dimension "Strength" has only a slight similarity to the dimension "Prestige" identified by Lievens, Van Hoye, and Schreurs (2005). In our study, "Strength" refers to trait characteristics such as "powerful", "power-oriented", and "rich". This suggests that employees associate with an EBP not only utilitarian aspects such as reliability, but they also consider symbolic aspects (see for a similar argumentation in the luxury brand context, Sung, Choi, Ahn, and Song, 2015).

Our scale provides managers with information on the personal traits employees associate with an employer brand. Furthermore, the scale offers managers the possibility to compare employer brand personalities across organizations and sectors and to identify benchmark personalities (see similar Aaker, 1997).

However, our research also has some limitations. First, we used only five employer brands to test our scale. Second, our sample only contained potential employees of the five

employer brands. Further studies are needed to test whether the findings also hold when integrating actual employees in the sample.

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